

Virtual Instruction: Myths and Realities



Note: This article is the second of a three-part series on training opportunities for veterinary practices. Look for Part Three next month.

You need to train your team on a new protocol for examining and testing your feline patients with renal disease. You meticulously worked on the logistics of the schedule. Two receptionists and technicians did not attend the session, and an emergency pulled away one of your doctors and two additional technicians. On top of that, another receptionist called in sick.

What are you to do? Will you conduct another training session that will be poorly attended? Will you provide the staff that missed the training with reading material that will never be read? Incorporating virtual instruction into your training mix can help.

“Group interaction is the best way for people to learn,” says Nan Boss, DVM, owner of Best Friends Veterinary Center in Grafton, Wis. “Videos and virtual tools can help to make this type of training more efficient and more effective. I’m a fan!”

Regardless of the size, virtual team training can provide your practice with myriad benefits. Virtual instruction, or training your team without a trainer or other team member in the front of the room, can be a robust method for providing training on

7 Rules for creating successful virtual training

by Joel Gendelman, EdD, and Louise S. Dunn

new clinical techniques, office processes, management skills, acceptance and many customer service topics.

It can also be an extremely effective method in environments where it is not feasible to gather—in the same room and at the same time—all team members who require training (e.g., employees who work non-peak hours).

Imagine the benefits of virtual training if you are a hospital with:

- Multiple sites housing employees who require timely and consistent ongoing training.
- Employee personnel who work during shifts when your “experts” are not in the office.
- Requirements to provide instruction on a new treatment or procedure that can be delivered only by a staff member (e.g., clinician or specialist) with very limited availability.
- Need to easily store and access training presentations, including interactive activities and student questions and answers, to enhance the standardization of new-hire training.

Here are some of the ways you can effectively use virtual instruction in your practice.

- Update team members on additions and modifications to your employee handbook. Encourage all members to ask questions and discuss their concerns.
- Reinforce training on new protocols and services. Take this opportunity to address concerns and resolve any snags.
- Capture senior team members performing technical procedures (e.g., running cytology equipment or processing third-party payments). Make viewing these recordings an integral part of your practice’s skills training program. This will allow team members to view demonstrations by senior team members who have limited availability.

There are many virtual meeting and training tools and services out there to support your efforts. These include Cisco Webex, Citix Go To Meeting, Adobe Connect and Microsoft Live Meeting. Most have similar capabilities and their specific features expand frequently. It would be wise to explore the specifics before making a decision for your practice.

To many, virtual training is the wave of the future. Some of you are already effectively using virtual resources (e.g., answering phones from a home-based call center and third-party accounting, scheduling, reminder compliance, and human resources services). Done well, virtual instruction can be a powerful method in your practice’s training arsenal. Done poorly, it can be an expensive failure.

Here are seven rules for creating and delivering virtual training that works. Following these rules will add to the effectiveness of any training that your practice offers; adhering to them is critical for providing quality virtual instruction.

Rule 1: Put your training on a diet

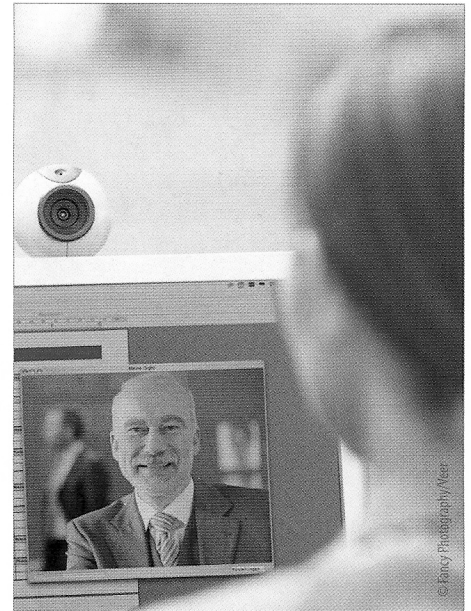
Virtual audiences will not tolerate irrelevant training or long training sessions. Make sure that your virtual instruction closely aligns with your key practice indicators and employee tasks. Separate longer training classes into modules of approximately 20 minutes.

Team members will feel that anything less is trivial and not worth their time. Shorter training sessions enable attendees to better able grasp the skills you are teaching.

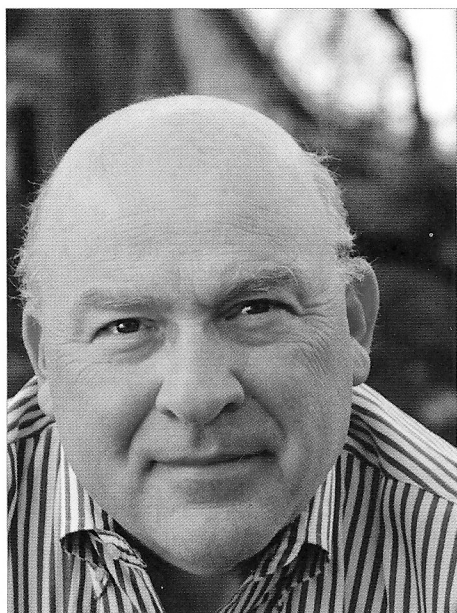
Rule 2: Gain attention from the start

Never begin a virtual training session by having team members introduce themselves. Nothing is more boring at the beginning of a virtual training session than hearing an extended roll call. Instead, start out your virtual training session with a strong opening.

It should be scripted, memorized and delivered with force. It should capture the essence of your virtual training



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session and the attention of the audience at the same time. A solid introduction will ensure that you start out strong and set the stage for building momentum as you continue.

Use the same type of icebreakers and creative introductions that you would employ in a face-to-face training class. For example, ask team members to introduce themselves through the eyes of their pet or ask them the breed of dog or cat that they most resemble. You may incorporate background information about the attendees but only as it relates to the training being presented.

Rule 3: Establish relevance

Team members who see no benefit in a virtual training session are much more likely to tune out your class. You need to address this in the first 30 seconds. Once you demonstrate to your team how they will be directly affected by the content of your virtual training session, you will garner their attention. We sometimes refer to this as “What’s In it For Me?” or WIFM.

For the practice owner, this should include consistent patient and client care, as well as profitability. On the other hand, for employees this should include greater competency and an enhanced skill set. Consider using a thought-provoking question or quote, a hard-to-believe statistic, a satirical cartoon, or a compelling newspaper article. Do consider the age group of your employees in selecting a good opener.

Rule 4: Present information with a twist

During a virtual training session you probably spend most of your time presenting. Unfortunately, the “presenting” part can be the most boring portion of any training activity. It can be especially toxic in virtual training sessions because time seems to go more slowly when team members lack physical contact with a group. Make your virtual training as compact as you can.

Try to economize by focusing on a few major points. If you are using PowerPoint

slides, attempt to display a new one at least every 3 to 5 minutes. Supplement your virtual training sessions with demonstrations, question-and-answer sessions and audience interactions. Finally, use a variety of content delivery types and media. Here are some additional practical hints to consider in presenting information during your virtual training session.

- Never be the “sage on the stage.” Always attempt to be the “guide on the side.”
- Everyone likes a good story. Use case studies or stories to engage team members. Ask them to share their own experiences related to the content.
- Use strong instructional strategies. Present key ideas using different types of media. These include text, graphics, animations, illustrations, diagrams, schematics and models. Use strategies that include simulations, analogies, case studies, examples that feature doing it “right,” non-examples that identify what not to do, mnemonics, jokes, war stories and testimonials. The sky is the limit, and you are restricted only by your own imagination.
- Present familiar information from another point of view. Perhaps the animal’s owner, or the animal itself.
- Focus on the delivery, not just the content. While the content of your training is crucial, the way you deliver it plays a huge role in how the audience accepts your message. Stick to the schedule. Structure your virtual training session for maximum impact. Present information in short and logical chunks. Maintain a casual and effective tone. Keep a brisk pace. Roll with the punches. Finally, if there are outside distractions as you are presenting, let team members know what is occurring.

Rule 5: Ask compelling questions

We rely upon questions to gain

information, especially during a virtual training session. You should spend at least 10% of your time asking and answering questions. Do not just use questions at the end of your class—pepper them throughout the event.

The polling feature is one of the best tools in your virtual training arsenal. For example, ask participants, “What treatment for Grade 2 Periodontal Disease have your clients most accepted? A) Greenies, B) Dental Cleaning, C) T/D, D) Other commercial products. Select one on your screen now.”

Then use your virtual instruction software or service to display as a bar chart how many participants selected each. Follow with a brief discussion of the results. Do not rely exclusively upon polling questions. As with most things in life, you never want to overuse a good thing. Even the most effective strategies become predictable and boring when they are overused.

Many major virtual training services and applications incorporate more complex multiple-choice, matching and fill-in questions. Some even offer grading capabilities. Assessing the knowledge and capabilities of participants during and following the training is paramount and must be a critical element of any training effort, particularly virtual instruction.

Rule 6: Employ interactive activities

Interaction is critical to any successful training experience. It provides your team members with opportunities to internalize the information in your virtual training class and make it their own. While interacting is easy when the other parties are in the same room, it is a bit more difficult when they are not. However, we successfully interact virtually with people all the time. We send emails, write notes, talk on the telephone, text message, and some of us even Skype. So in promoting interaction in virtual training, we are only enhancing skills that we already rely upon every day.

Enticing team members to participate in your virtual training session by

including polls or typed questions and responses is a step in the right direction. Remember to frame these questions in terms of their value to the audience, not to you. Give team members adequate time to respond, but do not slow down the action. Close the poll when the responding trickles down.

Rule 7: End with a bang

I recommend that you never end a virtual training session with a dry restatement of the agenda. Never say, “Let’s summarize what we’ve covered.” Go back to why team members are there in the first place.

You need to end your virtual training session with an inspirational finale and a call to action. Nothing is more deflating than a question-and-answer session. Try conducting these throughout your session or early in your ending. I know that this sounds counterintuitive. Trust me, it works!

If your virtual training session was meant to address a problem or a yearning, do not simply remind them of that fact. Get them to feel it. Go back to your introduction; conjure up their hopes and dreams.

Regardless of the training method you use, virtual or otherwise, for any training to be effective, it must be an integral part of your practice’s culture and each of your employees’ professional development plan. ■

Joel Gendelman, EdD, is president of business training and consulting firm Future Technologies, Inc. He has over 25 years of experience developing training and talent management solutions for companies including Sandoz, Amgen, Kaiser Permanente, Microsoft, Nissan, Hewlett-Packard and Lockheed Martin. Joel is lead content development blogger for *TrainingIndustry.com*. He can be contacted at fttraining.com. You may also follow him on Twitter at @JGend.

Louise S. Dunn is owner of Snowgoose Veterinary Management Consulting. With her almost 40 years of experience, she works with veterinarians who want to develop results-driven strategic plans.



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